

High Hopes and Hurdles — How Grant Applications Matter at CSR

By Don Luckett

The minute Dr. Marian Wachtel heard her mother had septicemia she knew it spelled serious trouble. "My mother wasn't your normal 65-year old," says Wachtel. "She was an insulin-dependent diabetic with many health complications." A blood infection could send her downhill fast. Wachtel knew this because she is a microbiologist at the National Institutes of Health, where she manages reviews of small business grant applications for the Infectious Diseases and Microbiology Integrated Review Group at the NIH Center for Scientific Review.



Marian Wachtel

"I went home to New Jersey the next day," says Wachtel. Added to the urgency was her responsibility for assigning reviewers to a large number of applications on her desk—applications to develop diagnostics and therapies for infectious diseases. Knowing the need for this research, she took the applications with her and worked on them as she sat by her mother in the hospital. The importance of this work really hit home when her mother was given an antibiotic developed by one of the researchers on her review panel.

Wachtel's mother certainly had many reasons to be proud of her daughter. One of the ones she liked to talk about the most involves years of dedication. "I have a bag of clothes in my office," explains Wachtel.

"Almost every day after work, I change into blue jeans and drive to a stable in Brookeville, Maryland." She has competed in amateur equestrian show jumping competitions since she was 12 years old. A few weeks before she rushed to her mother's bedside, Wachtel qualified to compete in two national finals competitions, riding a horse she co-owned with her mother.

It may seem unrelated to her job. "But it's related," says Wachtel. Recruiting scientists to review cutting-edge grant applications, convening review meetings, and producing summaries of these reviews is a demanding job. The deadlines can come fast like hurdles to a show horse. "When you're riding to a jump you can hurt yourself, so you have to learn how to focus," says Wachtel. "I also learned that if you're dogged in your pursuit you may eventually attain it . . . and all this has served me well at CSR." Her evenings on horseback have also helped her manage the many responsibilities of her job. "I can have an awful day at work . . . but when I ride it forces me to put that stuff aside."



Wachtel with her horse, Bailey.
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Unfortunately, there were realities she could not force aside. According to a report issued by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in November 2003, septicemia is the 10th leading cause of death in the United States—over 30,000 died from the condition in 2001. Though Wachtel's mother received the best drugs and care available, she

died after a month-long struggle.

Wachtel says she "moped around" her parents' house for a few days before deciding to visit her former jumping teacher, Susan Van Blarcom. "I told her I didn't think I'd be able to compete in the national finals," says Wachtel. "I hadn't ridden in a month and my heart wasn't in it." Her teacher told her that whatever happens, she would be a winner if she just went. Van Blarcom then insisted that she ride that day—it is what her mother would want.



Wachtel at the 2003 Washington International Horse Show in the MCI Center. Photo used with permission, © Al Cook www.acphotovideo.com 2003.

Wachtel took the advice to heart and jumped back into the saddle. She went to three national and state finals in a span of 5 days, competing in two divisions: the "hunter" finals, where the horse's form is judged, and the "equitation" finals, where the rider's form is judged.

"I thought I'd be doing well if I didn't fall off," she says. "But I was amazed." She won 6th and 10th place ribbons in the national adult hunter finals, and she won 1st place in the Maryland adult equitation finals.

Wachtel also jumped back into her work at CSR. It was not too hard to get up to full speed with her reviewers and applicants. "I'm a people person," she says, "and it means a lot to me to deal with these people and the applications they submit . . . particularly when I know that what gets reviewed may end up in an IV bag that could make a real difference to someone."

Wachtel spoke with the reviewer who developed the antibiotic given to her mother. "You're going to have to work harder next time," she recalls saying to him. "It was my way of telling him I appreciated his efforts." Wachtel then explains, "I'm a great believer in saying thank you. I know how long it takes to review these applications, and I know my reviewers are really busy."

The applications can be many, but they do not seem to weigh Wachtel down. On the contrary, they appear to energize her. "You never know where the next great idea will come from," she says. Her voice has spunk and hope. She has read the applications on her desk, and she knows what they all have to say: "We are going to work harder this time."



Wachtel back at work.